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ABSTRACT

This analogue study investigated the relationship between attitude similarity and expertness on perceived trustworthiness of a confederate counselor. Undergraduate students (N=51) who scored in the extreme conservative or liberal range of an attitude survey on controversial topics were randomly matched with a confederate counselor whose introductory biographical sketch depicted him or her as attitudinally similar or dissimilar to the subject as well as either experienced/expert or inexperienced/nonexpert in the field. Following a 10-minute meeting between the counselor and the subject which was similar in content to a clinical intake interview, subjects completed the Counselor Rating Form to assess their perceptions of counselor trustworthiness. A three-way analysis of variance was performed with liberal/conservative, attitude similarity, and expertness as the independent factors and perceived trustworthiness as the dependent measure. No significant main effects or three-way interactions were obtained. A significant two-way interaction effect was demonstrated between liberalism/conservatism and expertness/nonexpertness. Conservative subjects rated the nonexpert counselors significantly higher on trustworthiness than did liberal subjects, while liberal and consevative subjects did not differ in trustworthiness ratings of expert counselors. (NB)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTITUDE SIMILARITY AND EXPERTNESS ON PERCEIVED TRUSTWORTHINESS OF A COUNSELOR

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ABSTRACT

The Relationship Between Attitude Similarity and Expertness on Perceived Trustworthiness of a Counselor

This analogue study investigated the relationship between the "therapeugenic" (Bloom & Trautt, 1978) factors of attitude similarity and expertness on perceived trustworthiness of a confederate counselor. The present study expanded previous research by jointly manipulating attitude similarity and perceived expertness to allow for assessment of both independent and interactive effects.

Fifty-one undergraduate students participated. Attitude similarity between "client" and "counselor" was manipulated by prescreening subjects with an attitude survey consisting of controversial topics. Subjects who scored in the extreme conservative or liberal range of the survey were randomly matched with a confederate counselor whose introductory biographical sketch depicted him or her as attitudinally similar or dissimilar to the subject as well as either relatively experienced/expert or inexperienced/nonexpert in the field. The Counselor Rating Form (CRF) (LaCrosse & Barak, 1976) was utilized to measure the subjects' perceptions of counselor trustworthiness.

The mini-intake interview consisted of a 10-minute meeting between confederate counselor and subject, and was similar in content to a clinical intake interview. Subjects were read a brief biographical sketch of the same-sex counselor who would be interviewing them. This sketch contained aspects of

education and experience conveying both the degree of "expertness" and "attitude similarity." Immediately following the simulated interview, subjects completed the CRF.

A three-way ANOVA was performed with liberal/conservative, attitude similarity, and expertness as the independent factors and perceived trustworthiness as the dependent measure. No significant main effects or three-way interactions were obtained. A significant two-way interaction effect was demonstrated between Liberalism/Conservatism and Expertness/Nonexpertness. Specifically, conservative subjects rated the nonexpert counselors significantly higher on trustworthiness than did the liberal subjects, while liberal and conservative subjects did not differ in trustworthiness ratings of expert counselors. Results were interpreted and possible implications for the counseling setting were discussed.

The Relationship Between Attitude Similarity and Expertness on Perceived Trustworthiness of a Counselor

McKay, S.L., McGuire, J.M., Abbott, D.W., & Blau, B.I. (1987). Paper presented at the meetings of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA.

The term "therapeugenic factors" has been proposed by Bloom, Weigel and Trautt (1977) and Bloom and Trautt (1978) to account for the factors which may increase the probability that any psychotherapeutic procedure will be effective independent of specific therapist techniques. These factors, such as therapist gender, fee of services, office decor, perceived expertness, and so forth were reconceptualized to replace the more commonly used terms as "placebo" or nonspecific factors, and have been said to differ from placebo factors in that they are not construed to be incidental in psychological treatment.

This analogue study investigated the relationship between the "therapeugenic" (Bloom & Trautt, 1978) factors of attitude similarity and expertness on perceived trustworthiness of a confederate counselor. Several investigators have demonstrated that attitude similarity is positively related to perceived attractiveness, likability and competence of counselors (Good, 1975; Griffitt & Byrne, 1970; Trautt, Finer & Calisher, 1980). For example, in a study of attitude similarity and attraction to a psychotherapist, Good (1975) found that freshman-level students rated imaginary therapists who were attitudinally similar to themselves significantly higher than attitudinally dissimilar ones, with respect to open-mindedness, ability to promote feelings of ease, understanding of people,

effectiveness as a psychotherapist, personal attractiveness, and willingness to recommend as a friend. In addition, Trautt, Finer and Calisher (1980) found that undergraduate students rated a hypothetical therapist with similar attitudes as themselves as more qualified, more likeable, and more interpersonally attractive.

There has been mixed support, however, for the notion that counselors who are perceived as "expert" will positively impact the counseling relationship (Brischetto & Merluzzi, 1981; Kunin & Rodin, 1982; Strong & Schmidt, 1970). For example, Brischetto and Merluzzi (1981) found that expert and nonexpert introductions of the therapist had no impact upon the subjects' perceptions of expertness. Speigel (1976) found that suggestions of expertness through hypothetical biographical sketches and simulated taped interviews, produced higher evaluations of counselor competence than did attributed similarity for both "affiliative" (friendship) problems and academic problems, with which the hypothetical client was seeking help.

In another study conducted by Schmidt and Strong (1970), male college students identified "cues of expertness" after viewing videotapes of actual counselors (with varying degrees of training and experience) interviewing the same male client. The Order of rated expertness was almost inversely related to the order of experience and training. The less experienced counselors were actually rated as being more responsive to the

client on the videotape in addition to perceiving them as more logical and rational in their questioning.

Several investigators also have demonstrated that both level of expertness and gender of the counselor can have a significant impact on the amount of self-disclosure of the client as well as level of perceived empathy (Kunin & Rodin, 1982).

The present study was designed to determine if attitude similarity and perceived counselor expertness influences ratings of trustworthiness toward the counselor. This study extended previous research in this area in that attitude similarity was jointly manipulated with the variation of expert or nonexpert introductions of the confederate therapist in order to allow for assessment of both independent and interactive effects. Thus, there were four main treatment groups: 1) High Attitude Similarity, High expert; 2) High Attitude Similarity, Low Expert; 3) Low Attitude Similarity, High Expert; and 4) Low Attitude Similarity, Low Expert.

Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that the main effects of both low attitude similarity and low expertness would produce low trustworthiness ratings of the therapist. Conversely, high attitude similarity and high expertness was expected to yield a high degree of trustworthiness.

METHOD

Fifty-one undergraduate students participated. Subjects were students generally in their 20's while the two confederates were graduate students who were 30 and 49 years old respectively. Attitude similarity between "client" and "counselor" was manipulated by prescreening subjects with an attitude survey consisting of controversial topics (abortion, military spending, capital punishment, etc.). Subjects who scored in the extreme conservative or liberal range of the survey were randomly matched with a confederate counselor whose introductory biographical sketch depicted him or her as attitudinally similar or dissimilar to the subject as well as either relatively experienced/expert or inexperienced/nonexpert in the field. To increase validity, each of the scored items on the attitude survey were included in all four of the biographical scripts. The Counselor Rating Form (CRF) (LaCrosse & Barak, 1976) was utilized to measure the subjects' perceptions of counselor trustworthiness.

A simulated interview technique was used and consisted of a ten-minute meeting between confederate counselor and subject. A set of questions were formulated to approximate topic areas covered in an actual clinical intake interview.

Following informed consent procedures, subjects were read a brief biographical sketch of the counselor who would be interviewing them. The introduction contained aspects of

education and experience as well as community/research activities and interests conveying both degree of "expertness" and "attitude similarity." Immediately following the simulated interview, subjects completed the CRF and were debriefed.

Prior to data collection, a three-part pilot study was conducted which assessed the reliability and validity of the attitude survey and interview procedures. A Pearson Correlation was performed for test-retest reliability of the survey and yielded a correlation coefficient of .94. Also, since a certain degree of response variability was expected among the subjects, the questions from the mini-intake interview were rated for level of personal intrusiveness to insure that all subjects would be asked the same proportion of personal questions during the simulated interview. Finally, the four biographical sketches were rated on the expert/nonexpert, conservative/liberal attitude dimensions to check their validity as stimulus materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A three-way analysis of variance was performed with liberal/conservative, attitude similarity and expertness as the independent factors and perceived trustworthiness as the dependent measure.

The results failed to confirm the primary hypothesis that there would be a positive relationship between attitude similarity, expertness and perceived counselor trustworthiness. In other words, the main effects of similarity or dissimilarity of attitudes as well as level of expertise did not have a significant impact on the subjects' perceptions or counselor trustworthiness. Similarly, no significant difference was obtained in the ANOVA for the three-way interaction of Liberal/Conservative, Expert/Nonexpert and Attitude Similarity /Attitude Dissimilarity, $F(1,43) = .01$, $p = .93$.

While neither Liberal/Conservative nor Expert/Nonexpert conditions alone were significant to produce a statistically significant effect, a significant two-way interaction was obtained for the Liberal/Conservative and Expert/Nonexpert variables. Specifically, conservative subjects rated the nonexpert counselors significantly higher on trustworthiness than did the liberal subjects, while liberal and conservative subjects did not differ in trustworthiness ratings of expert counselors. That is, subjects who tended to adhere to such beliefs as capital punishment, increased national defense and

residential segregation (sample issues from the attitude survey), expressed trust of a counselor described as a nonexpert more than one described as an expert.

While the two-way interaction between liberal/conservative and expert/nonexpert seems puzzling, one possible interpretation is that perhaps clients who are more conservative in their attitudes tend to trust a counselor who is relatively inexperienced (as opposed to an expert) due to an underlying assumption of the conservative concept of individuality and non-intervention. Monaghan (1984), in his political communication model of conservatives and liberals, described how "...the conservative view of human relationships may be understood in terms of its anchor in the principle of individuality and variety" (p. 418). Thus, one might speculate that the "conservatives" in this study felt more comfortable with the nonexpert counselors because of their perception that a person who is inexperienced would not intervene or intrude upon his or her individuality. Of course, further research conducted in this particular area would serve to clarify this idea.

Generally, both liberal and conservative subjects in each of the four main treatment groups tended to trust the confederate counselors about the same. In addition, 96% of the subjects rated the counselors as experts (when using a split-median method with the Expertness scores from the CRF).

It may be that the overall age difference between the confederates and subjects as well as a tendency to give

socially desirable responses, counselor competence and the nonjudgmental nature of their responses all could have contributed to increased attraction or respect for the counselors. In fact, the average Attractiveness Rating as measured by the CRF was approximately the same as the overall Trustworthiness average ($\underline{M}$=66.71 and $\underline{M}$=68.51, respectively).

Although this study is subject to limitations inherent in analogue research, it nevertheless exemplifies the practicality of studying counselor variables. To the degree that counselor trust is enhanced early in the counseling process, self-disclosure will be facilitated and ultimately the therapeutic process itself. Therefore, the findings from the present study have possible implications for a therapeutic setting. Perhaps it is not as important as previously thought to focus on counselor credentials and attitude similarity to the client in determining the client's initial impression of the counselor. Instead, future research in the area of counselor variables affecting trustworthiness should focus more on the manner in which the counselor communicates and responds to the client. For example, in a recent investigation, Jordan (1985) found that confederate counselors were rated as significantly more trustworthy, expert and attractive when they actively communicated explicit privacy regarding a personal interview situation than counselors who failed to communicate information about the privacy/confidentiality of the interviews.

Furthermore, clinical exploration of these factors, utilizing actual practicing counselors and their clients, would increase the external validity of research conducted in this area.

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